Response to Atsuko Tsuji's Paper on 'The Event, Writing and the Self: Walter Benjamin's Language Theory'

AUTHOR(S):

Fiona Brettel

CITATION:

Fiona Brettel. Response to Atsuko Tsuji's Paper on 'The Event, Writing and the Self: Walter Benjamin's Language Theory'. Happiness and Personal Growth: Dialogue between Philosophy, Psychology, and Comparative Education 2010: 33-35

ISSUE DATE:

2010-03-31

URL:

http://hdl.handle.net/2433/143019

Response to Atsuko Tsuji's Paper on 'The Event, Writing and the Self: Walter Benjamin's Language Theory'

FIONA BRETTEL
Institute of Education, University of London

I have to begin by admitting that I have very little knowledge of the work of Walter Benjamin and am unfamiliar with his theory of language. This being the case, I have found it difficult to get a firm grasp on many of the ideas put forward in this paper, and so my response must be limited to a few points that do appear to touch on themes of common interest. Therefore some of the questions I raise should not necessarily be seen as antagonistic to the theories that have been put forward, but more as an attempt to comprehend what is being said in terms of my own understanding and hence, unavoidably, from the position of my own research interests.

The points Atsuko Tsuji raises in the first paragraph of her paper (Tsuji, 2010) appear to highlight the need for caution, or at the very least the need to recognise the limitations of what it is we can say about ourselves, and that our ability to narrate the self is by no means as easy or straightforward as perhaps many would like to believe. Yet, what is it that makes it so difficult for us to do this? Or why should these self-narratives necessarily lead an individual to believe that they possess full autonomy, as Tsuji fears? Is it a particular kind of narrative that is at issue here? If so it would be helpful to have some specific examples of how this form of narrative is being used and a more detailed critique of the problems arising from the use of language that Tsuji believes creates this image of autonomy. It would also be useful if a fuller explanation of what is meant by autonomy in this context could have been given, as it is obviously seen as negative attribute. Is it the way that autonomy has come to be construed from a certain theoretical position that is at issue here? Perhaps with a more sensitive and less totalising reading, it might retain aspects that could be more sympathetically viewed.

It would also be interesting to speculate whether a counter argument could be advocated that shows self-narrative in a more illuminating light. After all it could be said that the French writer Marcel Proust was the self-narrator *par excellence,* and Walter Benjamin did appear to have sympathy for his work. In attempting a form of autobiography couldn't we come to see how difficult it is to write about ourselves, or come to recognise our frustration as we realise how inadequate our attempts seem be, or that we are always so much more than what we can say. Would there then be times when the ability to speak about our experiences might be seen in a more positive, or exploratory, light and not merely as a form of control? Of course the quality of that expression and the insight it gives would be vital, but I think few would accuse the great writers of literature of attempting to propagate the view of a self-directed individual in complete control of their own actions and the consequences that arise from them, indeed more often they appear to go out of their way to show that the opposite is the case. It would be a shame to dismiss self-narrative out of hand, when with greater sensitivity and insight it could open an individual to different ways of seeing and being in the world.

Yet there are no doubt dangers in what often appears to be a very superficial idea of what self-narrative means, and where there may be a tendency to promote the idea that by drawing on some kind of raw sense experience we can, fairly straightforwardly, build up a picture of who we are, or that a person already has automatic access to all their thoughts and experiences and so it is simply a matter of reading off what lies before them, and that nothing might remain concealed and external influences have no effect on the way a person articulates these experiences.

In *Lectures on Philosophy*[1], Simone Weil[2] throws doubt on whether such an unproblematic relationship with ourselves or the world is even possible. She says:

> Sensations tell us nothing about the world: they contain neither matter, space, time, and they give us nothing outside of themselves, and in a way they are nothing. Nevertheless, we perceive the world; so what is given us is not simply sensations. Far from sensation being the only thing that is immediately given us, it is, as such, only given to us by an effort of abstraction, and by a great effort at that (Weil, 1978, p. 47).

Here I draw on the work of Peter Winch from his book *Simone Weil "The Just Balance"*, where he provides helpful philosophical background into some of these issues. He explains that the position that Weil is seeking to criticise belongs to the empiricist tradition[3] which sees the formation of concepts as involving 'a certain passively given material (sensations) the inherent characteristics of and relations between which are then discerned through an activity of the mind which then, on the basis of what it has thus discerned, regroups this material under concepts' (Winch, 1989, p. 20). He then helpfully goes on to explain what is meant by the concept of sensation in empiricist epistemology, and that it is different from how we might use the idea of learning from sensations in everyday life. The example he gives is that it would be possible to locate a hidden radiator by the sensation of heat it gives off, but that when we use the term like this,

> We are employing a developed, structured concept of sensation which has its life and its sense in its relation to talk about many other things *besides* sensations (radiators, and so on). Empiricist epistemology, on the other hand, needs a concept of sensation that can be understood independent of any such talk. It is supposed to *underlie* these other kinds of talk and to make them possible' (p. 21, italics in original).

I think what Simone Weil and Peter Winch seem to be suggesting is that to even recognise the presence of a sensation you already need to have a concept of what a sensation is, and that it needs to be understood by referring it to other things as well. What is it then that allows us to perceive the world as we do if it is not a direct contact with the sensations we receive from the world? Here Weil brings in a discussion of language, she says: 'Language is what marks off human beings from everything else' (Weil, 1978, p. 65) and 'it is something that belongs only to human beings. It is what conveys thoughts. It is something artificial in relation to the individual (but natural for society). It is social' (*ibid.*). This appears to suggest that language is not something we

are born with, it is not natural for us, but it is something we learn from those around us, we are born into a world where language is already in use. Earlier in the chapter she makes the rather cryptic comment that 'when we are on the point of giving birth to a thought, it comes to birth in a world that is already ordered' (p. 32). I think this idea of order could refer to the fact that we are born into a world where existing forms of making sense of it are already in place, for Weil also relates how 'due to language, we are steeped in an intellectual environment. It is impossible for us to have thoughts which are not related to all the thoughts bequeathed to us through language' (p. 75). It is through exposure to the culture and language we inherit as human beings that we can begin to make sense of the world.

For example, I might say that I find myself affected by certain things I see. My attention may be drawn to how a slight breeze catches and disturbs the surface of a body of still water, sending out a tremor of ripples in response to that gentle breath of air. This responsiveness to the world should not be confused with any empiricist account of an unmediated response to sensations. I did not wake up one morning to suddenly find I had acquired a new ability to be sensitive to how things in the world made me feel, but such sensitivity developed out of my engagement with literature and how others wrote about their experiences, and it was my sense of affinity with what they had written that made me become familiar with, or take notice of such feelings myself. As Weil says: 'In so far as we give expression to a state we are in, it becomes something that belongs to the experience of all men' (*ibid.*). So then I, in my turn, give expression to what I have experienced, and others may themselves feel recognition in what was said, and a different way of seeing or interacting with the world is acknowledged.

NOTES

1 Simone Weil did not actually write this book, but these are notes of her lectures written down by one of her students. Simone Weil taught philosophy at the girls' lycée at Roanne in the school year 1933-34.
2 A French philosopher (1909-43).
3 The Collins English Dictionary gives the definition of empiricism as: '*Philosophy*, the doctrine that all knowledge derives from experience'.

REFERENCES

Tsuji, A. (2010) The Event, Writing and the Self: Walter Benjamin's Language Theory, *Proceedings of the 3rd International Symposium between the Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University (Japan) and the Institute of Education, University of London (UK)* (Kyoto, Kyoto University).
Weil, S. (1978) *Lectures on Philosophy*, trans. Price, H. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
Winch, P. (1989) *Simone Weil 'The Just Balance'* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).